

409 Sodergren

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(Theme music)

- The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

- Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with author Steven Sodergren discussing his book *The Army of the Potomac in the Overland and Petersburg Campaigns*. I'm your host Jay Williams, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. It's sponsored by Norwich University. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. The Civil War fundamentally reshaped American life. Its effects reverberated throughout politics, religion, race relations, and even the physical landscape of the United States. It also shaped military practice and ideas about effective warfare that persisted until WWI. In *The Army of the Potomac in the Overland and Petersburg Campaigns*, Steven E. Sodergren examines these transformations in the practice of modern warfare, particularly the introduction of trench warfare and campaigns of attrition. These grim new realities significantly affected the mindset and morale of Union soldiers. Sodergren shows how increases in the level and frequency of combat beginning with the 1864 Overland campaign caused tremendous physical and emotional suffering for the men of the Army of the Potomac. By the end of this series of battles some Union soldiers began to express doubt in their cause and in their leaders. The result was widespread demoralization and a rising number of men disobeying orders and even deserting. During the Petersburg campaign that followed, soldiers found a degree of security in trench warfare as well as access to mail, quality food, and other luxuries that being dug in allowed. This was regenerative, both physically and psychologically. Sodergren argues that Union soldiers were greatly heartened by the reelection of Abraham Lincoln in November 1864. They then endured the brutal conditions of trench warfare to emerge with a renewed sense of purpose that would ultimately win the war in 1865. Drawing on a wealth of original documents including soldiers' letters and diaries, official military correspondence, and court martial records, Sodergren paints a moving picture of the daily lives of Union soldiers as they experienced a profound shift in the way their world waged large-scale warfare. Steven Sodergren earned a BA in history and philosophy from Cornell College and an MA and PhD in American and military history from the University of Kansas. During his graduate career he earned a dissertation fellowship from the US Army Center of Military History for his work on the adaptation of Union soldiers to tactical conditions during the American Civil War. Sodergren has taught in the History and Political Science Department at Norwich University since 2007. His first book *The Army of the Potomac* won the 2018 William E. Colby Military Writers Award. Please join me in welcoming Steven Sodergren to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.

(Applause)

- Thank you all for being here at the wonderful facilities here at the Pritzker Military Library. It's my pleasure to be here standing before you offering some thoughts on my book that has generally done quite well. I'm honored to be the recipient of the 2018 William E. Colby Military Writers Award. It was a delightful surprise to see such work of mine recognized in such a manner. If I can begin today, I'd like to start by talking really about where the inspiration for this project came from, and a lot of it had to do with my upbringing in the area. Although I'm currently located in Vermont teaching at Norwich University, I grew up in the Chicago area. I'm from Glen Ellyn, Illinois, born and raised. Highland Park born and raised, excuse me, but eventually moved out to Glen Ellyn. And

being raised there, I had the opportunity to visit a museum that was in the area on several occasions, and that is the Frist Division Museum that you can find in Wheaton, Illinois. Cantigny Park, Big Red One Museum. If you have not been, it's a wonderful facility. They've had a series of great events recently for the centennial of the First World War, and as a kid it just seemed so overwhelming to me. When I first went there it was either on a school trip, or I know that my dad, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Sodergren, United States Air Force Retired, took me there on more than one occasion. And at first I was just excited to jump all over the tanks. They've got Sherman tanks, old Stuart tanks, and stuff like that, in the park there. But as time went on I went into the museum, and they had some magnificent exhibits on the First World War. And it was there that I began to learn about the First World War, and that's when I came around to what is the prevalent and accepted thinking about the First World War, and that is trench warfare is terrible, it is horrific, it is dehumanizing. Four years of men fighting in blood and ugliness, and it just seemed to crush the human spirit. And the more I researched about this the more I learned that the First World War really kind of set the standard for trench warfare as the epitome of war at its worst, ground warfare at its worst, perhaps. And really if you do research on the First World War there's one person who encapsulates a lot of these ideas, and it was somebody who was there. Charles Wilson, eventually Lord Charles Wilson, was a British medical officer in the First World War, and he saw firsthand what trench warfare did to the human beings exposed to it. He was attached to a royal fusiliers unit. He served in the Western front from 1914 to 1917, and after the war was over he had spent years treating the physical but also the mental wounds that men received from their experience with trench warfare. The idea that prolonged experience to that would eventually destroy them. And after the war was over he went on to a rather illustrious career. He was--he went into a medical career. He went on to become Winston Churchill's personal doctor. But at the end of the Second World War Charles Wilson Moran published his book *Anatomy of Courage*. It's a great book, if you haven't read it. It's a wonderful window into the mentality of particularly WWI soldiers. And in that book he reaches certain conclusions, and they basically confirm the superficial take we have on trench warfare. It's horrible, but also that men cannot endure it. Specifically he says, "A man's courage is his capital, and he is always spending." Moran reaches the conclusion that the longer men are exposed to trench warfare, and actually just broadly combat in general, the more likely it is they will crack. No matter how brave you are, he says, no matter how crazy you are, eventually you will collapse under the strain, as he concludes, "No man can go on forever. Sooner or later all men feel fear." He we know looking backward from WWI the trench warfare is horrible, so imagine in my early days of studying the Civil War to discover that there was trench warfare in the Civil War, that trenches were a prevalent contributor to the combat tactics of the Civil War era. When we think of the Civil War we don't think of trench warfare. We think of long, tidy rows of men marching across an open field. We think of Picket's charge, of men being slaughtered in broad numbers by rifle and artillery fire, which if you think about it is not all that different from charging across a no man's land. But over the course of the Civil War, tactics changed. Over the course of the Civil War we see men removed from an open field setting and engaging more in what we would call trench warfare, wars of field fortifications. And really in that final year, from 1864 to 1865 we see that coming to fruition. There had been experimentations, not like the Civil War generation invented trench warfare, but there was a recognition as time went on that maybe this is not working, these open field tactics. Maybe there's no cowardice in digging a hole in the ground to protect yourself from musketry and artillery shells. And so by the end of the war both sides are routinely digging in wherever they go. And perhaps connected to that, it's the last year of the war that is among the bloodiest fighting that you will see in the

Civil War. And it fascinated me to see how soldiers, particularly Union soldiers, responded to this. How did they adapt, or fail to adapt, to these changing combat conditions on the ground? But there is another issue that I wanted to study here: not necessarily whether or not they adapted to the tactics, but also, how did they win? A lot of historians unfortunately see the war as sort of a foregone conclusion following Gettysburg. It's the high tide of the Confederacy, which suggests everything's downhill from then, so the Union was obviously going to win. Nobody knew that in 1864. Listen to the soldiers, and they're planning out the next two or three years of the war ahead of them. They're enlisting for three or four more years. Nobody knew the war was going to last another year. How did they persevere? How did they adapt? How did they win? And that is another question that I sought to answer with my narrative: not only how did men respond to combat conditions, but how did they persevere and emerge victorious from them? And so my research involved examining over 170 soldiers, particularly their letters and their diaries to get a window into who these guys were, particularly the Army of the Potomac, the largest Union Army in the last year of the war. This was the force that was directing its onslaught against Richmond, Virginia, and the army of Robert E. Lee. 120,000 men. What did they think? How did they respond to these changing combat conditions? And my surprise was that they had adapted, after significant rough patches, they adapted well. They endured. They survived, and I think they're a wonderful display of the American citizen soldier spirit that is pervasive in almost any conflict. So I'd like to begin by talking about that last year of the war. My focus is on the East. My focus is on the embattled Richmond/Washington D.C. corridor that by spring of 1864 had seen its fair share of fighting. Well, it really hasn't seen anything yet. In spring of 1864 a new commander emerged in the Union Army, and that was Ulysses S. Grant. The Hero of Vicksburg, as he was known, he arrives in the East not as commander of the Army of the Potomac. That position would be held by George Gordon Meade, the victor of Gettysburg, but even larger. Ulysses S. Grant is general in chief of the Union Army. He commands every single Union soldier in the field. And when he takes command in 1864 his plan is to advance. He wants to pressure the Confederacy to collapse. And thus is the origin of the spring 1864 campaign, what becomes known as the Overland campaign. The Overland campaign begins as yet another push by the Union forces towards Richmond. But really it's a little bit different than that. The idea is that they're not just gonna push towards Richmond. They're gonna try to bag Lee's army, too. If you take out Lee's army, you can take Richmond any time you want. And so that is the target. And to do that the Army of the Potomac amasses 120,000 men, nearly its largest size to that point in the war. To face downs approximately sixty to 65,000 men in Lee's army. And on May 1, 1864 the army advances. One more into the breach for the Army of the Potomac. And the men are hopeful. Grant has a great reputation. They look around, they see the large numbers of men around them. They will win. Put simply, the battles that would occur in May and June 1864 were unlike anything that had been seen in the Eastern Theater before this. It is the bloodiest fighting of the entire war. For forty days, from May 5th to June 15, 1864 the two armies engage in a death struggle where they don't let go of one another. Forty days, one hundred miles, four big battles, dozens of smaller skirmishes, and by the end of it 55,000 Union casualties. If you do the math, Grant's going to lose forty-five percent of his army in this campaign. The Confederates are gonna lose an equal number, proportionally. One historian has called this constant, grinding all-destroying warfare, and this is where we see the Civil War change from a war of periodic battles separated by weeks and months to constant slogging along a single line in Richmond, towards Richmond. And it begins with the Wilderness. The Wilderness becomes famous for its title. Occurring in a wooded area. Lee is crafty, and he knows he's massively outnumbered, so he strikes Grant where he knows he'll be

weakest. By the way, Grant is not in command of the Army of the Potomac specifically, but he's along for the ride. He realizes this is the main root of advance, so Grant's there calling the shots. Lee strikes in the wooded area near the chancellor's house where a battle had been fought almost exactly a year earlier in Chancellorsville and manages to make gate Union superiority in numbers and artillery, and the result is a bloody, fratricidal conflict with the woods catching on fire and soldiers blindly firing, sometimes into their own men. The fighting goes on for three days, May 5th to the 7th, and the Union Army struggled with it. The Union Army loses 17,000 men. Private Robert McCready, 11th Pennsylvania, refers to the Wilderness as "a tragedy, grandly awfully sublime," while another soldier Private John Haley from the 17th Maine would just call it "a dreadfully mixed-up mess." The Wilderness is not unique in any sort of manner. In many ways it followed the pattern of previous battles: Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, the Bull Run, the Seven Days campaign-- Union Army advances, Lee does his thing, stymies that advance, inflicts casualties. But what happens next is when we begin to see the shift occur in the Eastern Theater. After the Wilderness, does the Army of the Potomac retreat to lick its wounds? No. Grant, to quote him, keeps moving on. He will not let up. He will keep pushing, and he is lauded by historians for this--for his tenacity, for his stubbornness. But he's asking his men, who just fought one of the bloodiest battles of the war, to go and fight another one the next day and then after that another one and then another one and another one. The war has changed, and Grant is asking a great deal of his men. And that is very representative by the Battle of Spotsylvania. As Grant moves on on May 8th to try to sweep around the Confederate flank, he gets stopped again by Confederate forces near Spotsylvania courthouse. What follows is two weeks of intermittent combat as Grant tries to feel out the Confederate position, to get around Lee, to encircle him so he can destroy his army. But Lee's men are always there, they're always in the way, and what are they in? Trenches. Lee's men by this point in the war have realized a good way to stop an attack is dig in and hit them with firepower. And that's exactly what will happen on May 12th. The highlight, or lowlight if you will, of the Spotsylvania battles occurs on May 12th with the attack on the Mule Shoe salient where Grant throws two army corps at salients on the Confederate lines. This is in my opinion the bloodiest fighting of the entire war. For twenty-four straight hours the two sides just keep throwing reinforcements, reinforcements, reinforcements at each other. It's pouring down rain for much of this, which means their black powder weapons won't work. So that do they have to use? Bayonets, rifle muskets, clubs, their fists. It's ugly, and that's what everybody agrees. Private John Haley again refers to the Mule Shoe as a "seething, bubbling, roaring hell of hate and murder." Private Wilbur Fisk of the 2nd Vermont calls it, "the most singular and obstinate fighting that I have seen during the war or ever heard or dreamed of in my life." It's at Spotsylvania that soldiers adopt a different tone. The superlative. These guys aren't green soldiers. They are veterans. Wilbur Fisk has been in since '61, Haley since '62. They've seen the elephant. But they haven't seen this before. Warfare has changed, and they increasingly struggle with that change. And it goes on and on and on. After Spotsylvania, they move on to the North Anna River, which could be called a lull in the campaign, if you accept the fact that a battle of 7,000 casualties lost to the Union is a lull. It is the smallest battle of the campaign as Grant manages to push past Lee's army that is guarding the approaches to the North Anna River in Virginia. But it pales in comparison to Spotsylvania where over--on May 12th alone the Union loses 9,500 men. The casualties keep piling up, but Grant's moving forward. It seems like he's making progress. It seems like every day he's getting closer to Richmond, but the casualties are piling up, and the men are suffering. And no better place is that seen than Cold Harbor. The Cold Harbor battlefield becomes really synonymous with Civil War slaughter, the idea of Grant throwing his legions against a

well-entrenched Confederate position, and that is what happens on the morning of June 3rd. Two to three army corps are thrown against a well prepared Confederate position, and the result is 7,000 more Union casualties. But what I found interesting is the soldiers noted that it was terrible. As one Massachusetts soldiers noted, "Amid such an iron hail of grape canisters and bullets, I cannot convince of how anyone escaped." But they're still talking about Spotsylvania during Cold Harbor. Cold Harbor pales in comparison compared to some of the things they've seen to this point. But by this point, this is now by mid-June 1864 the Overland campaign, as it's known, begins winding down as Grant begins to rethink his strategy. And it's during that time that we begin to realize the impact that this has had on the men. The growing bloodshed along with the increasing casualties and the physical challenges imposed by this campaign begins to test the ability of the men to endure. Specifically if you look at the numbers, by the end of this campaign, in forty days the Union Army loses 7,600 killed, 38,000 wounded, almost 9,000 missing-- mostly captured--55000 casualties. And this has an impact. The survivors recognize that that is what they are, survivors. How do they process that? Why are they alive when so many of their friends are not? Union officer Stephen Weld would note, "I shall be lucky if I get through this campaign without being killed. Everyone is being killed that I know." While Private John Haley the private from Maine, notes, "I calculate a ten-to-one chance that I will expire before my term does." And on top of all this was the physical challenge. Not only are you losing friends, but this was nonstop. They fight during the day, they march at night to another field where they fight against the next day. The men are increasingly asked to push themselves like never before. Colonel George Bernard, the regimental commander of the 18th Massachusetts, would write, "The suffering of the men is almost indescribable. I can hear them howling for help as they hear us groping along in the dark along our march. The men in the ranks are so utterly wretched that they throw themselves in the middle of the road wallowing in mud, howling and crying like madmen." And all of this contributes to a decline in soldier morale. As time goes on the casualties begin to wear down the men. The losses become overwhelming. The number of men lost, men being buried, such as here at the Wilderness battlefield. The soldiers begin to figure out that the war's changed. Private John Steward of the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery would note, " I am sick of this war. I am tired of the butchery of human beings." For Private Austin Kendall of the 117th New York he identifies the exact moment when he given up on the Union cause. He notes it as the death of a stranger. In his diary he notes, " A man was shot in the thigh and did not have proper care, and he bled to death. We could not find out what his name was, nor what regiment or anything about him. And some boys of our regiment went and brought him to where we were and dug a grave and laid him in it. I think that was the hardest thing I ever saw." You see a crisis building in the Army of the Potomac. They cannot continue on like this. But unfortunately they'll be asked to continue on, 'cause the Overland campaign quickly gives way to the Petersburg campaign. Following Cold Harbor, Grant pauses for a moment and thinks he's now--at cold harbor he's only miles from Richmond, but he can't get here, so he decides to get a bit more creative. He sweeps his army south of the James River, and doesn't go towards Richmond but goes towards Petersburg, Virginia, which is about thirty miles south of Richmond. Petersburg, if you look at a map, you can see is where several rail lines unite and form a single rail line feeding into Richmond. You take Petersburg, you cut Richmond off from the rest of the Confederacy. Lee has to defend it. And Grant gets there, and he gets there before the bulk of Lee's forces, but something happens when he gets his army there. His army won't do what he wants it to. When his men get there the casualties have taken their toll, and when they get there they find once again Confederate soldiers. As Lieutenant Thomas Galloway notes when they arrive in Petersburg, "Our lines have advanced at all

fronts, but the enemy contests every inch of ground with desperate resistance, so our loss has been very heavy." The army is not attacking very effectively at Petersburg, and the result is that they're unable to take the city. And Grant grudgingly settles in for a siege. To be fair, it's not a siege. He never actually seals the city off completely. It is a campaign to capture the city. But what happens is, he realizes his men can't perform the impossible. They are exhausted. They are depleted. So he digs in--so does Lee--and waits for reinforcement. And as they do so they begin to manufacture the most sophisticated set of trench lines seen on the North American continent. For the next nine months Union soldiers and Confederate soldiers would dig parallel lines stretching over eighty miles all the way from the east side of Richmond down to Five Forks, thirty/forty miles west of Petersburg. These entrenchments are designed to facilitate the capture or the defense of Richmond. But this goes on and on and on for reasons I'll get to. But ultimately this is a nine-month siege, 292 days. Grant keeps trying. He keeps trying to defeat Lee's army. He throws troops around his left flank. Lee's men block him. Throws troops around his right flank. Lee's men block him. Tries to dig under him, the famous Battle of the Crater at the end of July 1864. They dig a tunnel under the Confederate lines, fill it with gunpowder, blow it up. It works for about an hour until it doesn't, disastrously. What all of this shows is Grant has developed a respect for trench warfare. You can't just throw men at trenches. Interestingly enough the men, the guys in the ranks, had figured that out a long time earlier. And if you look at the Petersburg campaign, the bodies keep piling up. Over nine months--it's more stretched out, but over nine months 50,000 more Union troops will be killed, wounded, or captured. That number is actually low, because about midway through the siege they stop keeping track of day-to-day casualties. They only focus on major battles that occur. Which means guys who are lost to sniper fire, artillery fire, normal day-to-day operations around Petersburg, stop getting counted. So it's probably closer to 60,000 casualties. What's interesting about this, going back to Lord Moran, Moran reached the conclusion in his study of WWI that WWI was different. WWI was unique. As he says, "The real difference between the war of 1914 and the wars of history is in the absence of a close period, when men safe for the moment could rest in buildup or reserve." his point was, when you're in a trench, you're always in combat. There's always the chance that a sniper will kill you. There's always a chance that a mortar round will fall into your trench and blow you out of this world. You have no escape, and you know that. It's tremendously taxing upon the brain. But he's wrong. Because there was an example of this prior to WWI, and it was at Petersburg, as these men were constantly under threat, constantly challenged to prepare themselves. Life in the trenches, much like war, was long periods of tedium punctuated by moments of extreme violence. There were battles. There were attacks. You had to go over the top into no man's land, although those were WWI terms. They were never used during the Civil War. But ultimately the men realized that this was a horrible environment. Captain Samuel Rodman Smith of the 4th Delaware would write that summer, "Three of us occupy a hole six feet by ten feet by three feet deep. We lay in our water and provisions overnight and keep pretty close during the day especially when the bullets fly a-low." Private Wesley Gould of the 45th Pennsylvania agreed, noting, "Every night we advance a little closer with our rifle pits. Some places the lines are but a few yards apart, and if a man from either side shows his head he is pretty sure to lose it." One soldier compared this existence to the punishment of criminals. Another declared, "Never was there such a beastly life as this." The point is--and this isn't exactly groundbreaking stuff--trench warfare was terrible. The soldiers were exposed to what could arguably be called modern warfare for the first time. How did they endure it? How did they survive nine months of it and emerge triumphant at the end? And unfortunately the answer is, at first they didn't. It's easy to find evidence in the early days of the

Petersburg siege of men demoralized by the losses, of looking at the graves, the soldier grave such as these on the Wilderness battlefield and reaching the conclusion that they were doomed. As Colonel George Bernard the Massachusetts regimental commander noted, "Men who have been through everything in this whole war are now beginning to cave." A lot of this had to do with a loss of officers. Twelve general officers are killed and wounded during the Overland campaign. More than 1,000 regimental and company commanders are killed and wounded during the Overland campaign. These were men that had led their soldiers for years, and now they're gone. The inspiration has disappeared. But what's more important was the loss of friends. Forty-five percent of the people you fought with are gone. And the result was stress, demoralization, fatalism. What's the point; I'm not gonna make it. After the Spotsylvania attack, Captain Mason Tyler of the 37th Massachusetts noted that a good friend of his had not survived, and his reaction was immediate. He wrote in a letter, "I've had a deep sense of depression as if I were being deserted and left alone." At the end of the campaign a Massachusetts soldier noted, "All of us see the frail threads that our lives hang upon more vividly day by day as our little band dissipates." The men lose faith in the cause, and thus in the early days of Petersburg, as they're first exposed to trench warfare, they grow--there's no other word for it--insubordinate. Combat refusals. Soldiers, individual soldiers, whole units, refusing to make attacks. I found several examples of this that are in my book. Just one example is Private Robert McBride's 11th Pennsylvania. They're ordered to attack the Confederate position near Petersburg on June 24th. Their colonel leads them across the open ground, and they instantly come under fire from Confederate artillery. At that point McBride notes that the men, in good order and without disorder but without waiting for orders, moved obliquely to the right to the cover of ground. Their colonel, Colonel Carl, runs up to them and starts cursing them as cowards. "How dare you? I did not give you orders to retreat." This is McBride's description of what happened next. "The officers almost to a man refused to obey his orders or do anything until his insults should be retracted. The men were becoming dangerous. Carl laid his hand on his pistol. Instantly a score of rifles were leveled upon him. He withdrew his hand, apologized to both officers and men, and we moved on to the rifle pits without further discord." Several examples of this. Is this outright mutiny? Not necessarily. This is nowhere near the kind of French mutiny that we see in WWI in 1917. It's more the soldiers going, uh-uh, not this time. But as many examples as there are of combat refusals, there's more examples of outright insubordination, soldiers refusing to engage in any sort of extended attacks, but also refusing to take orders from the men they believe had led them astray, had led them to defeat. For instance, you see over the summer of 1864 a spike in courts martial in the Union Army. Insubordination increases, alcoholism increases, violence between soldiers increases, and at first the officer corps doesn't know what to do about it. One example--and I poured over what, really understudied court martial records from the American Civil War, and I found many, many cases of men just refusing to take orders from commanders anymore. Private George Black's a great example. George Black, 63rd New York. These trenches that we've seen, they didn't just manifest themselves. They didn't have machinery to make them. When you needed to make a fort or a trench, you had the soldiers do it. They had shovels that they had to dig, so the soldiers are the manpower here. And so during--mostly at night, because it's cooler in Virginia, and they're not being shot at as much, they're digging. And so one day Private George Black of the 63rd New York has enough. And his lieutenant--he says he's not gonna work anymore. His lieutenant orders him back to work, Black refuses, his lieutenant orders him again, Black takes a swing at his lieutenant with a shovel. He has to be restrained by his sergeant before he's arrested. What's interesting about this case is that at the trial, the court martial, Black is--it turns out he was drunk, turns out alcohol was a factor,

but many men in the unit including some of his officers testify on his behalf and say, "He's a three-year veteran. This is something that's never happened before. He's a good soldier. We don't know what happened. He just had a bad day." Still it's an army court martial. He gets convicted. But what really the biggest example of the problem of insubordination of the Union Army during this period is not violence or alcoholism. It's desertion. Desertion plagues the Union Army throughout 1864 as more and more men become insubordinate, more and more challenges to maintaining the ranks. Desertion rises steadily in the Union Army throughout 1864. Actually, if you look you see it spikes around October/November 1864. This is in many ways a consequence of the overland campaign. You actually have to predate each one of these, 'cause these are the reported previous months. So if it spikes in October it's actually September. But the result--the point of this is that by September/October 1864, ten--11,000 Union soldiers are reported absent without leave. That was the thing about the Civil War. They weren't in Europe. They weren't in the Pacific. If you wanted to leave you could walk home. You could hop on a train and be home in hours. And many soldiers did that. They grew demoralized with army leadership, and they left. Rarely do you see soldiers actually come out and admit, yes, I deserted. Plenty of courts martial of desertion. Almost all of them are defending themselves. Because what is the punishment for desertion? Death. Death by hanging or firing squad, usually hanging. So rarely do you see it. One example, Private Joseph Reid in the 90th Pennsylvania. He's charged with in the most shameful manner abandoning arms and equipment at the Wilderness. He claims that he was actually helping wounded off the field and got lost. Not an unusual claim for battlefield desertion. But what's interesting, just like at Private Black's court martial he defends himself with officers and men from his regiment saying, "This is a good guy. This is unusual for him. He's a veteran." Still, he is found guilty, and he's sentenced to death. However later it would be commuted to ninety days hard labor. Not unusual for that to happen, as we'll see. He probably preferred the ninety days hard labor over the death sentence. But rarely do you see soldiers actually coming out and say, "Yes, I deserted," but when it is it's very revealing. Private George Seabird of the 48th Pennsylvania, he pleads guilt for not once but twice deserting his unit in July and August of 1864. His defense: "I just wanted to see my family." Seems like an open and shut case. Seems like he is headed for the gallows 'til it is discovered over the course of the trial that he is only fifteen years old. He faked his enlistment, faked his parental signature, and lied about his age. Thus, the court shows mercy. The court cites, quote, "his evident youth and weak mental faculties" in reducing his sentence from death to the loss of pay of eight dollars a month. What we see here is the men struggling, particularly early. This is the summer of 1864. They're wrestling with the legacy of the Overland campaign. They're struggling to adapt. How do they make it? Well, they do make it. If we look at WWI, we imagine there's a certain inevitability to their decline. They will collapse at some point. The French in 1917, the Russians in 1917, the Italians in 1917, the Germans in 1918. Eventually an army will break. I found it interesting, 'cause they go in the opposite direction. They get better. They get stronger. Their morale improves, and it's trench warfare that does it. How is this possible? Well, it's possible because we look at these images of breastworks, abatis, cheval de frise, all these wonderful French words to describe these different fortifications. And they're imposing, and you would go, "I would not want to attack that. I would not have to face that." And you know what. The men realize that too. They realize, arguably before their commanders do, that warfare has changed. As one soldier notes--Lieutenant Theodore Vaill of the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery, "Modern warfare is largely made up of entrenching and fortifying. 100 men behind entrenchments are more than a match for a thousand in front." The men realize that trenches are good; they save lives. They would much rather be in the

entrenchments than attacking the entrenchments. Captain George Washington Whitman of the 51st New York that July would write a letter to his older brother, a young--a man by the name of Walt Whitman--yes, that Walt Whitman--Captain Whitman would note, "We have a very strong position here and are having pretty good, easy times. If General Lee thinks he can drive us away I wish he would pitch in, as we are all prepared for him." They enthusiastically welcome a Confederate attack, 'cause now they have an advantage. But really the line that sums up the Union perspective is Major Elisha Hunt Rhodes of the 2nd Rhode Island. "Great is the shovel and spade. I would as soon dig out the rebels as fight them." Trench warfare restores this sense of control over their environment. These men were volunteers. They were citizen soldiers, American citizen soldiers. They believed that they had voluntarily contributed their service to their country, and they deserved some respect for that. And for three years they had seen, in their words, their lives wasted, being used as pawns on battlefields, marching across open ground to be slaughtered. Trenches give them physical control. The deeper you dig your hole, the deeper you dig your trench, the more likely it is you will survive. You have personal responsibility for your own survival on the battlefield, finally, instead of just being one cog in a line marching across the battlefield. There's no cowardice in that, they conclude. There's a recognition that this is what we need to do to survive, but it's also what we need to do to win. And along the way as they develop this kind of mental adaptation to trench warfare where they embrace it, several factors serve to help them out. Some are conscious, some are unconscious, but the Union and the Union Army helps these men adjust. One thing goes back to this issue of insubordination. You see what I think is both a conscious and unconscious leniency in courts martial in the Union Army that summer. More and more men have their sentences reduced. And a wonderful example of that is Private George Black. Remember he took a swing at his commanding officer? He is convicted. He's convicted of charges of insubordination, being drunk on duty, and attempting to strike a superior officer. He is sentenced to forfeit all pay, be dishonorably discharged, and submit to hard labor for the duration of his enlistment, a year and a half. His sentence is sent up to his division commander to review, General Nelson Miles. On that court martial General Miles writes a notation. "In view of the interests of the service, which requires the service of every man in the ranks, all but Private Black's forfeiture of pay is hereby commuted." Miles acknowledges, and you see this several more times--yes, he did something wrong, yes, we need to punish him, but we need bodies. We need the men in the ranks. He is better serving his country in uniform than in hard labor. And so many desertion and insubordination convictions get reduced down to forfeiture of pay, and that's it. To keep the men in the ranks. And so yes, it's a pragmatic, we need the bodies, but it's also I think, deep down I think at least some of these officers are going, "We need to cut these guys some slack. They've been through hell. These are good soldiers who are going through a bad time." But as time goes on we see more and more steps being made to help out the men in the ranks. As Private Robert Card of the 26th Massachusetts notes, "A soldier his happy as long as his food is good and sure." Once the soldiers reach a stationary position at Petersburg they're able to really gain all of the largesse of the Union position. City Point becomes one of the largest harbors and ports in America, as all of the Union supplies that couldn't reach them during the Overland campaign because they were on the move, so they're in a fixed position, and that can be delivered to the front lines. The Union makes a railroad that goes up to the trench lines. Men are being fed out of boxcars. And the result is that the men improve. As Sergeant Samuel Clear of the 116th Pennsylvania, "We are living fat for the very first time since leaving home." In addition to that we see charitable organizations, much like the logistical apparatus, we see organizations like the United States Sanitary Commission, the United States Christian Commission employing their

recourses. During the Civil War you had volunteers from throughout the Union, primarily women, raising money to buy food, medical supplies, reading materials, everything that a soldier needed to supplement the supplies being given to them by the army. In particular, vegetables to ward off scurvy, morphine to help numb the pain if their hospitals were short of it, newspapers to keep them informed of what was going on. More and more of these resources were deployed. As one soldier notes, "Every soldier has reason to bless the sanitary commission." In addition, as the war goes on, into the fall and winter months there's the increasing realization that the war is over or ending and they're winning. If you look at the fall of 1864, anybody who reads a newspaper can see the north is winning. Mobile falls in August, Atlanta falls in September. Victories from Philip Sheridan's army in the valley in September and October, and the number one thing, Lincoln gets reelected in November. The soldiers see that as a big, big win. The death knell of the Confederacy. Private Wilbur Fisk of the 2nd Vermont, "Better than paydays is the glorious news continually coming in from the armies and the voting booths all around. The rebellion is toppling down." And this was reinforced in person. The Confederate Army is beginning to collapse, and the soldiers can see it. Lee's army is plagued by desertion during this campaign, probably because they don't have many of the advantages the Union does, and the result is more and more soldiers deserting. A lot just go home to protect their families from Sherman's rampaging masses, but a lot just put up their hands and walk across no man's land and surrender. So Union soldiers get to see Confederates, and they're amazed. "They are a miserable looking set," Corporal Daniel Chisholm said, "with scarcely enough clothes to cover their nakedness. I don't think they will hold out much longer." And they didn't. After nine months of sieges with Union soldiers adapting to these trench warfare conditions, the operations around Petersburg would come to an end in late March/ early April 1865. Lee would try one more chance to break out at the end of March and fail. Grant sensing weakness throws his legions against Lee's army on April 1st, and Lee's line collapsed. Lee takes his army on the run. Petersburg surrenders on April 2nd, as does Richmond. Lee's army would surrender one week later. To the soldiers, it was vindication. Captain Rodman Smith of the 4th Delaware would write to his mother about Appomattox, saying, "Everybody here is wild with delight. Officers shook hands as if they had no seen each other for years, and between all, hats flying in the air, bands playing 'Yankee Doodle Dandy'. But there is the deep feeling of thankfulness and gratitude, which I felt that my life had been spared, while many a better had fallen. It will be a day long remembered." The men who see Appomattox had endured hell. They had gone a year since their initial stepping out from the spring campaigns. They had endured the Overland campaign, they had endured trench warfare, and they had emerged victorious. They had demonstrated--these American citizen soldiers had demonstrated a tremendous ability to adapt and overcome to the challenges posed by modern or some proto-modern form of warfare, the trenches before Petersburg. These methods allow the men to continue. And what's interesting is that some but not necessarily all of these methods were available to their Confederate opponents. These Union soldiers emerged triumphant and demonstrate not only just the Union victory, but the victory of the American combat soldier. These men ultimately did not shirk from the increasingly foreign battlefields that greeted them day after day in places like Spotsylvania and Petersburg. They achieved victory by silencing the demons of the Overland campaign and putting aside the terrors of trench life, at least until the war was over and they were safe at home. Then the nightmares would return, as they so often do. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

- How many Union soldiers were executed during these two campaigns that you've been talking about?

- About forty. Overall during the whole war, and this is a rough number because these are just the ones that were done officially. Every once in a while there was a kangaroo court and some Union office, particularly out west, would say, "You deserted. I'm gonna--I'm not gonna go through proper channels and do this." But over the war I believe the official number for the Civil War is 127 men executed by the Union Army for desertion, and there was approximately thirty or forty. In the book I talk about how not only were these men executed, it was done publicly. The soldiers in the trenches were pulled out, assembled in parade formation, and they watched. The whole goal was to show these executions to as many soldiers as possible to say--to act as a deterrence. So they didn't need to kill every single deserter. They just needed to make a point. And that was the mentality. In the Union Army--the Confederate Army, we don't have good reliable numbers, but Lee frequently resorted to executions for deserters, too, to try to stop that problem in his army, but it did not succeed. But to answer your original question, yes, several dozen during these campaigns. Ultimately, some made it to Lincoln's death. Lincoln had a tendency to pardon everybody, but not every desertion case made it to his desk.

- I was curious. In the same vein of the Grant question, when do you think he was convinced that the Union was gonna win? I mean, what was the time in which he thought, well, this is--we're gonna have some issues, but slowly but surely we're gonna grind this out?

- That's an excellent question. Grant just has that, you can call it confidence, or you can call it stubbornness, but Grant just has this notion--I mean, he thinks he's gonna win from '61. Very famously he says in his memoirs that after '62 it's like, look, we needed to change how we were gonna win, but we were gonna win. He gets frustrated during the Overland campaign. He absolutely--but part of the problem with the Overland campaign is an unwieldy command apparatus. He's not running the Army of the Potomac. George Meade is. And so he has to relay his orders through Meade, who then has to relay the orders through the corps commanders, who then have--and so it's frustrating for Grant not to be in charge, to be in charge but not really running the show. And so I think he's confident that they're gonna win, he knows the numbers are on their side, he just doesn't know how long it's gonna take. And he also realizes that--look at that position. The head of the Union Army is--Lincoln had a tendency to boot anybody who failed him. He sticks with Grant partly because he doesn't want to--probably because he's got confidence in Grant, to be fair, but also he doesn't want to shake the boat right before the election. But Grant knows he's gonna win. He just doesn't know how long it's gonna take to get here.

- This just came in. This is from Diane. How did each side adjust how it used its artillery to attack the enemy trenches?

- That's a good point. Well, here's the thing about trenches. The state of--and that's one thing I didn't really touch upon, is we've got to be careful with the comparisons of Petersburg and WWI. Big differences. Artillery, it's primitive compared to what they're gonna have in 1914. There's really no such thing as machine guns, barbed wire hasn't been invented yet, no gas. But really what the big thing--what made trenches so effective is that much of the artillery was of the more horizontal parabolic trajectories. So if you dig a trench in the ground, most of the rounds are gonna go over your head. What they didn't--what they had but not that many of were mortars. Mortars are basically vertical drops that would drop the round into the trenches. The Confederates certainly had very few of those. The Union, not all that much. And what this forces them to do is it forces them to--the Union eventually rolls up these huge mortars that drop like 500-pound projectiles on--and so they can drop the rounds in the trenches, which effectively negate them. But they eventually start using things, the so-called coehorn mortar. That was basically the birth of modern mortar artillery. Four-man crew could just pick it up,

carry it into a trench, use it, and lob rounds at the enemy. So, what the trenches force them to do is really innovate, because the trenches effectively negate much of the artillery at the time, so they have to develop new artillery forms in order to overcome these challenges and restore the devastating nature of firepower.

- Thank you for a great presentation.

- Thank you so much.

(Applause)

- Thank you to Steven Sodergren for an outstanding discussion and to Norwich University for sponsoring this program. The book is *The Army of the Potomac and the Overland and Petersburg Campaigns*, published by LSU Press. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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(Theme music)

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